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The Olukumi People of Ukwu-Nzu: *A Unique Yoruba Enclave*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**The Olukumi migration pattern to
they present location in Igboland.**

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The Olukumi are one of the ancient subgroups of the Yoruba and are indigenous to the Aniocha North area of Delta State in Nigeria. They are culturally rich people, originally from the Yoruba communities and settling in this area long ago. Their ancestry traces back to the towns of Owo and Akure in Yorubaland. Today, the Olukumi people live in eight distinct communities west of the Niger River, which are collectively known as the Odiani Clan of Aniochaland.

Ukwu Nzu: A Town Full of Tradition and Resources

Ukwu Nzu is one of the major towns in the Odiani Clan. They are very historically and culturally enlightened. The name “Ukwu-Nzu” itself contains two meanings that are connected with the heritage of the town. “Ukwu” is the Igbo word for “big” or “huge,” a reference to large deposits of Kaolinite, a type of mineral also known locally as “Nzu” or “native chalk.” The people of Ukwu-Nzu were so associated with this chalk that neighbours like Issele-Uku teased them as “ndi Ukwu-Nzu” – “people with chalky legs” – from the dust that coated their legs when they walked.

While the association of Ukwu-Nzu with chalk might be well known, it is even more intriguing how these people have held on to their Yoruba language amidst being sandwiched by Igbo-speaking communities. This begets questions into other towns such as Umunede and Issele-Uku that claim to have migrated from Benin but lost their Benin language over time. In this case, the fact that the Olukumi people have been able to preserve their Yoruba dialect suggests that language loss generally occurs in areas already influenced by a

dominant culture.

Oral traditions among the Olukumi people speak to a mix of indigenous Igbo and Yoruba migrants from Owo, Akure, and the Akoko areas. Over time, with their settlements growing to be close to Enuani-speaking Igbo people, they became speakers of both the Olukumi and Enuani dialects of the Igbo language. Of the towns in Odiani Clan, Ukwu-Nzu and Ugbodu are bilingual, while the remainder speak the Enuani dialect.

The Impact of Enculturation and Language Preservation

Enculturation is a process in which an individual or group loses his/their original culture, language, and customs when in contact with a more dominant culture. A good example of this is how people migrating into large cities like Lagos or Ibadan may start speaking Yoruba or adopt Yoruba culture over time. Language and cultural attrition usually occur in areas already inhabited by the dominant culture, as was observed in the case of Benin migrants in the Anioma region who lost their original language upon migrating into Igbo-speaking territories.

But the Olukumi are a strong example of language retention. With the various sets of languages and cultures surrounded, they have retained both language and customs. The blending of Yoruba and Igbo culture within the setting of their communities is apparent in traditions, festivals, and the way of life.

Odiani Clan: United and Proud People

The Odiani Clan is made up of the following towns, each with its own history and cultural contributions: Ukwu-Nzu, Ugbodu, Ubulubu, Idumu-Ogo, Ugboba, Ogodor, Ogbe Onei (Obomkpa), and Anioma Village.

Villages outside Olukumi but of Olukumi origin include Onichaku, Ubulu Uku, and Ogbekenu quarters/villages of Onicha-Ugbo.



Obi of Ukwu-Nzu, HRM Obi Christopher Okafor Ogoh I, JP. Photo: Thenumbers

The Odiani Clan is ruled by five kings, namely the Obi of Ukwu-Nzu, Obi of Ugbodu, Obi of Ubulubu, Obi of Ugboba, and Obi of Idumuogo. The community is proud of their traditions and tried to preserve both their Olukumi and Enuani dialects. There is great pride in the role that the Olukumi played in the Ekumeku resistance against British colonial forces and in support of Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War.



Photos of the 48th anniversary of HRM Obi Ogoh I, the Obi of Ukwu-Nzu Kingdom, and the traditional head of the Odiani Clan. Photo by I. Okonji.

A member of the Olukumi community contributed with a discussion where a call was made to ensure that cultural heritage is passed to the younger generation. He insisted that in preserving the identity of the children, they have to teach them both Olukumi and Enuani languages:

People always ask us why we speak both Olukumi and Enuani, or why we bear Igbo names. We have lived amongst the Delta Igbo for several centuries, fought in the Ekumeku resistance alongside our kinsmen, but we have also been integrated with other neighbouring Delta Igbo towns, Edo, and Esan. It is only important that we retain the language and culture. I hope that parents will do a great deal to ensure the children know both Olukumi and Enuani; let them understand who they are, what their origins are. In such a way, we cannot lose the next generation. -Ugboodu Anioma

Ukwu-Nzu: A Mixture of Yoruba and Igbo Stocks

Ukwu-Nzu is an interesting story in many ways. Besides being the

headquarters of the Odiani Clan, it also holds a wealth of history. In a recent conversation with the very highly revered monarch, His Royal Majesty, Obi Christopher Ogoh I, who ascended the throne in 1974, Ukwu-Nzu was founded by one Ugbe who migrated from Ife down to the area with several others, including three princes of the royal family. Over time, Ukwu-Nzu grew into both a trade and cultural exchange center.

The town is known for its powerful influence on traditional medicine, though Christianity has increasingly become dominant in the community. Even with the shift to Christianity, some still practice traditional healing, and the town maintains its deep connection to its ancestral roots.

The political system of Ukwu-Nzu is also unique. This is a rotational kingship, introduced by their forebears from the Yoruba people of Ife. This system ensures that leadership rotates among the royal families to keep up the sense of equality and unity within the community.

Preservation of Culture and Language

In Ukwu-Nzu, it is very important that this cultural heritage be preserved. The education of the young about their history, culture, and language continues. The people also have maintained good ties with their ancestral roots through the Ihogwuda Deity, kept in the palace. It plays an important role in the protection of the kingdom against any harm and also remains at the center of spiritual life in the community.

The people of Ukwu-Nzu and all the Odiani Clan today remain proud of their dual identity, speaking both Olukumi and Enuani. Their bilingual identity testifies to the resilience and cultural richness of the Olukumi, who have been able to keep their roots in a constantly changing world.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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